

Munro S. EDMONSON. *The Ancient Future of the Itza (1982): A Translation of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin.*

For a second time the whole of the *Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* has been translated into English, and for the second time this effort has shown a lack of understanding of the Mayan language in general and of the Colonial texts in particular. The first translation effort was done by Maude W. Nakemson (1951), and is generally considered, as Edmonson (1982: XIV) notes, to be "seriously flawed". This remark Edmonson well have applied to his own translation effort of the Tizimin.

Concerning Edmonson's work on the Tizimin, it is a very sad thing to see so much work done in a misdirected manner. Even the knowledge of modern Yucatecan Mayan only, which he disclaims (page XV), would have prevented him from making some of the errors in translation which he has made. While it is indeed true that some lexical and grammatical forms in the Tizimin and Chilam Balam books in general are no longer in use, this does not mean that knowledge of modern Mayan would be of little help. Such an assertion would be akin to saying that the knowledge of modern English is of no use when working of the works of Shakespeare. In both cases, a person has to learn some vocabulary and some grammatical usages in order to deal adequately with the older works, because knowing the modern language is indeed a great help in both instances.

There is another problem which Edmonson for the most part has ignored. It is not at all possible to work on only one Book of Chilam Balam, without consulting the others in which many parallel passages are to be found. This is because none of the copies which we have today are originals, but only copies, and

mostly copies of copies (of copies of copies), and many problems have crept in during this process of copying. By consulting the parallel versions in the various copies, usually a consensus can be found for those passages which are in bad shape in one or more of the books.

When I last talked to Edmonson while he was still in the process of working on the Tizimin translation, I mentioned this factor to him and gave him a copy of the work, which I had really only just begun, in which the majority of the Tizimin, because its content is largely pre-Columbian in nature, is set beside the other parallel texts.¹ Thus, while the "close comparative study", which he alludes to on page XIII, has still not been done in the true sense, at least the facility for doing so was given him.

Some samples will suffice to let the reader know the extent of the problems in Edmonson's translation. In 1882, Daniel G. Brinton published a now foot quoted translation of a poem of lament, which is to be found on Edmonson's lines 579 - 594. Brinton's translation is given by Edmonson in a footnote for, I presume, comparison's sake. While Brinton's translation is not all that wonderful, all the Brinton's actions—which Edmonson has turned into gods—are in fact actions.²

Example: *tu kin coo yol ch'elem* (line 585). *Coo yol ch'elem*, literally "rolled (that is, flat things rolled up) heart (center) (of

¹ *Post Conquest Mayan literature based on pre-Columbian sources* (1978). In this work Mayan texts, mainly from the books of Chilam Balam, are presented. Since many of these texts appear in parallel versions in two or more books, transcripts of these texts are presented side by side to aid in the comparison of the various parallel texts. Much of this work is based on Barrera Vásquez' comparative work (n.d.), previous to his translation published in 1949.

² *El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam* (FCE, 1949). A Spanish translation based on the edited version of parallel texts from the various books of Chilam Balam (n.d.). The edited version was arrived at after a comparative study of the parallel texts from these various books was made. For example, the lines we are concerned with here, are presented also on page 115 of the *Codex Pérez* (1837). Barrera Vásquez listed each text by side, phrase by phrase, and then gave an edited version. Barrera's translation of the edited version of the lines in question is as follows:

que coman, que coman su maíz comprado;
 que beban, que beban su agua comprada,
 cuando sea el tiempo en que se encorven sobre la tierra,
 cuando sea el tiempo en que la tierra se les acerque a la faz.
 Entonces escalarán las nubes
 y escalarán las montañas;
 será el tiempo en que sufrirán la derrota,
 el tiempo de las revueltas y motines;
 será cuando se enrosque el cogollo del henequén *ch'elem*...

the) *ch'elem* (a relative of the *sisal* plant)", is something which would happen to a *ch'elem* plant during severe drought. That is, during a severe drought, even the center leaves (*vol*) of the *ch'elem* plant start to curl (*coo*), which is the indication of an unusually severe drought indeed. This is a meaningful sentence to a modern Mayan speaker. Thus, the phrase should be literally translated as "at this time, the heart of the *ch'elem* plant (shall) roll up", which in line with Barrera Vásquez' translation. Edmonson, however, claims that *Cotz' y Ol Ch'elem* is the god of 7, and translates the line as "on the day of *Cotz' y Ol Ch'elem*".

Throughout the Tizimin in particular, and in the Books of Chilam Balam in general, there are phrases which occur more than once. One would think, in the translating process, that there would be a certain amount of uniformity in translating these parallel phrases; but that does not seem to be one of Edmonson's strong points.

Example; why does Edmonson translate, *elom cio*, as "And *Elom Tz'itz'*" on line 611, and as "Burned is *Tz'itz'*" on line 4279? *Ts'its'* or *dzidz*, or *tz'itz'* or *cio*, depending on your orthography, is a synonym for *may*, and both are given in various dictionaries, such as the Cordemex, as "pezuña" and "pata". I think it is safe to translate this into English as "cloven hoof", such as that of a deer, peccary, etcétera. The intent of the phrase *elom cio*, "the cloven hoof shall burn", is, in my view, to say that the various game animals of cloven hoof will be burned by the fires caused by the severe drought.

Example: *elom u ku ch'ich'*, *uakom chaltun* (lines 4277-78) has a parallel, though transposed phrase, on lines 2262-68, *bin uakac chaltun*, *bin elec u ku ch'ich'*, which differs only in the type of future tense used: verb + *-om*, being the prophetic future, and *bin* + verb + *vc*, being a definite future. These phrases should, one would think, result in at least similar translations. We have, though, "burned is *Ku Ch'ich'*, and *Kom Chal Tun*" (lines 4277-78), and "the cisterns may burst; the bird god may be burned" (2267-68).

As I mentioned before, knowing some modern day vocabulary, and not even conferring with Colonial dictionaries, which would confirm the modern day vocabulary, would have set the translation of this pair of phrases right. *Chaltun* is "bedrock" (Edmonson seems to have gotten *chultun*, "cistern", confused with *chaltun*), and for the Mayans today, as evidently in the past, it means rock which is attached to the limestone shelf which makes

up Yucatan, sometimes referred to in English as "living bedrock". While on the surface an exposed portion of *chaltun* and a piece of limestone which is not attached to the limestones shelf, called *tunich*, "rock", are often not visually different, one can hear the difference between *chaltun* and *tunich* when the rock is struck: the *chaltun* having a clear ring to it, whereas the *tunich* has a rather dead thump.

The verb *uak*, "to burst, to explode", as for, example fireworks, when used with the word *chaltun* would be translated "to blow up, to shatter bedrock"; is a common phrase when one is working with dynamite in order to dig a well, trench, or whatever through bedrock. The phrase is also used when a milpa fire gets very hot and the bedrock begins to blow up from the heat.

As for the phrase *u ku ch'ich'* there can be little doubt, because of the possessive *u* in front of *ku*, that *ku* means something belonging to *ch'ich'*, "bird"; and while *ku* does mean "god", such as in *u kin ku* ("god's day", or as we say, "holiday"), in modern Mayan *u ku ch'ich'* is translated quite simply as "bird's nest". There is little doubt, from the Colonial dictionaries, that the word *ku* had both the meaning, "god" and "nest", nor is there little doubt that the phrase *u ku ch'ich'* would have ever been translated in any other way other than as "bird's nest". Notice that I haven't attacked the translation of the verb tenses, which is a problem in itself. Thus, the translation of the sentence most certainly should be "the bird's nest shall burn, the bedrock shall explode/shatter". The reference is again, as in the case with *elom ch'ic* and *coj yol ch'elem*, to severe drought and the forest fires which result.

The above examples are not isolated problems, but rather only limited samples of the types of problems which one encounters when reading Edmonson's translation. A student of Nahuatl, Frances Karttunen, has commented to me that Edmonson's bizarre misanalyses of the loan words from the language found in Mayan Colonial literature made her wonder about his translation of Mayan, by which I must surmise that Edmonson has not done justice to the Nahuatl words either.

I am not sure what Edmonson was trying to prove by translating with such disregard to the Mayan language, past and present. It is too bad that he has done so, because there are some interesting points which he has brought up about the workings of the Mayan calendar which people interested in the field should pay

attention to. I am afraid, though, that his comments might be dismissed because of the very faulty translation effort.

David Bolles
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